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Where There's Light

for Frieder Weiss

Almost there. Her shadow stretches across the white dance floor, her left foot taps briefly against the calf of the right pivot leg, *battement frappé*, then a complete turn, the close fitting costume accentuates the contours of her body on my monitor, I'm sweating – why am I sweating – my fingers hover over the keyboard, over the combinations, which I am about to key in, F1, F2, enter. In the control window of the infrared camera I now see the vertebrae of her upper back protruding, see how she bends forward to the sombre flow of notes of the violins and then taking breath curves backwards, right foot on *pointe*, free leg extended behind her, her arm as counterpoise, an *arabesque*, her neck so long. A brief, frozen pose, before she launches into the leap, the *Grand Jeté*. Now, hisses the director, who is standing behind me, who is breathing at my neck, now!, as if I had not heard the change in rhythm of the music myself. My hands twitch on the keyboard, my fingers fly over the keys, the outline of the dancer in the control field of my software belongs to me. Combinations of numbers flow across the monitor, I devise algorithms, fast, faster, I grab hold of her shadow, I manipulate it, give the commands: analyse, delay, F2, F3, enter. Stop. And in the middle of the leap, in the middle of the aerial splits, her splayed-out shadow simply remains fixed under the dancer. Still in flight, she turns round, she glances down at her frozen apparition, her face a mask of fear. Then she falls. She falls. Her plunge is choreographed, I know it, we all know it, but it doesn't look like it. On impact her hip-bones crash against the floor, the sound is muffled, it shatters the sudden *pianissimo* of the music. The dancer is now lying on

the bright dance carpet, her limbs twisted, her disbelieving gaze still fixed on the floor, as the shadow suddenly begins to move. To the electronic screeching of the melody the shadow raises its legs just a little higher, moves, readies itself. Then the shadow leaps after her, lays itself on her, on her unmoving body, it darkens her, she closes her eyes. Black.

Someone in the rehearsal room wheezes loudly.

Three seconds, says the director, as the working lights are switched on. Are you sure, I say, and guide the mouse cursor over the columns of calculations, over the pattern of numbers. He shakes his head.

Later I stand alone on the empty stage. The others have gone, enough for today, the director had called. At midnight the security staff will accompany me out of the theatre, the rules are strict in this country. I have no more than an hour to continue working. It's cool in the rehearsal room, the air conditioning is too cold, as everywhere else in the tall buildings shooting up in this overheated city, it puts the inhabitants on ice. I rub my hands, then I spread my arms and look for the light source, check the angles at which the projection hits the floor. The beamer is precisely adjusted, its image overlaps exactly with the field of observation of my infrared camera. My calculations are correct, I know that. I run a couple of steps, copy the dancer's sequence of movements. The camera sends the filming of my body to the computer. My software responds immediately and transforms my thermal image into a virtual shadow, which the beamer beside me projects onto the dance floor in real time

But something bothers me. It's the moment at which the image freezes. The second at which I have stopped the dancer's shadow, before sending it after her with a time delay. I am not sure about the length of the delay. Three seconds, I think, that can't be right, we're mistaken, it's too long. I stopped it again and again. And I've discovered something. With two

seconds delay, the shadow still belongs to the dancer, the viewer sees it as part of her. But then something tips over. Already at three seconds the shadow is seen as pursuer. So the uncoupling takes place somewhere in between, somewhere between the second and third second.

I go back to my work station, bend over the computer, reverse my command. The negative image becomes a positive image, instead of a shadow I draw a light trail behind me when I run across the stage floor. That's not enough, it's not what I'm looking for. I sit down in front of the monitor. More programming, more clicks, I'm losing time – the restless shuffling of the security man already in the room, yesyes, I'm coming – and the trail atomises into particles, small airborne particles, flowing away from me. Perhaps it's that, I think and look at the stream of light, which my steps on the floor release. Perhaps it's a matter of dissolution, not of separation, perhaps the dancer's contours have to disintegrate. As I switch off the apparatus, put off the light and shut the door of the rehearsal room behind me, I have to grin. I can imagine only too well the face of the dancer, her look, when I tell her that: I think I need you to dissolve. She will look at me as she did at the moment in which I was introduced to her. This, they said to her, as I stood in front of her on the first day of rehearsals, is the software artist from Germany, an engineer of the arts. He is the man who is going to steal your shadow.

I can't sleep that night. I'm surprised, I've already been here two weeks and was proud of not having any jetlag. Possibly it's the city, I think, as I step naked to the broad picture window of my hotel room. Hong Kong below me, in front of me, fitted together from blinking pixels. The glittering of the info screens and advertising signs radiates up to me on the 25th floor, the flickering of the LED fronted skyscraper facades, the

spasmodic twitching of the neon tubes behind the endless chains of shop windows down on the streets of Kowloon.

If I turn a little to the side, I can see the neighbouring skyscraper. It rises sheer above me into the night sky, it stacks apartment upon apartment, window upon window, fidgeting TV pictures upon dim light bulbs, there's no end to it, no one seems to sleep, there's always someone just switching a light on or off, someone entering or leaving a room, someone looking for darkness. They use light here as a building material, I think, as I turn away and let myself fall onto the bed again, they create a pure architecture of light. In the dark this city would cease to exist.

My German mobile phone on the bedside table is silent. I should switch it off, should insert the local Sim card, which the theatre gave me. I should stop waiting for news from Germany that doesn't come. She last wrote to me six days ago. Greetings from the grave, she wrote. And: I'll get in touch, as soon as I'm feeling better, forgive me. Since then she isn't replying. She doesn't answer the phone, she refuses, she remains silent. On the day before my departure, she wanted to come to me, she so much wanted. When can you be here, I had written back, I'm looking forward to seeing you, I'll pick you up. But the day passed, the afternoon, the early evening, nothing came from her, and on my monitor, on the website of German Rail, there were fewer and fewer trains she could still have taken. When I finally called her on her land line, she picked up after the seventh ring but didn't say anything. She breathed into the receiver – that sound, two, three breaths, so deep, so slow – she said nothing, simply said nothing, nothing at all, and then, before I could react, before I could say: it's me, what's wrong, say something, say something to me, she hung up. I held the receiver in my hand, stared at it, at the porous plastic casing, heard the crackling in the line, the engaged tone starting, and suddenly could hardly move.

Now I lean over to the bedside table, run my finger over the off button, see the light flashing on in the display, listen to the tune with which my phone switches off. I don't know what's wrong, what I should do, what I'm fighting. Her silence is a wall. She's falling from it, falling away from me and I can't hold her.

I can't go on with the shadow, I think, and in order to get rid of the flickering and flashing outside the window, I press my face into the pillow. Always these shadows, whether virtual or real, it can't be healthy, for anyone. But then, just before my consciousness sinks away, before I blur, I think: on the contrary. I have to observe myself. My own shadow. That's where the answers lie. Between the second and the third second.

The dancer is standing in a whirlpool of colours. She's not moving, her head is thrown back, her eyes closed. Her arms hang limp by her slim body. Bass lines rumble from the speakers, my projector is putting out video images, the animation of a Cantonese artist, spinning, pretty, gloss paint colours. The director wanted it, it looks silly, retro, a pointless fiddling around. It doesn't fit our conception, our aesthetic, we wanted to concentrate on the shadow and the dancer, on the moments of separation, of reconciliation. But I say nothing. Instead I look at the shadows of my hands on the keyboard.

When I splay my fingers, the outline of my hand merges with the reflection on the most worn keys, where the surface under the letters is worn quite smooth because it has been touched so often. The shadow itself can only be properly seen on the touchpad, but even there it appears indistinct, the light cast by my monitor is too diffuse.

Perhaps we have to use more light sources in the staging, I think, and move my hand slowly back and forward in mid-air. Perhaps it's that,

that's lacking. We should be brighter, the light needs to be broken, a prism.

Once more, calls the director into the sudden silence, once more, come on, what's wrong. His voice sounds impatient, he must already have said it several times. Still staring at my shadow, I jump up, in order to start the video in the video computer once again. And then I see it. I see it as I jump up, see it while my body is already bending over the mouse of the video computer, while my eyes are still on my keyboard. I see it exactly. And freeze in the middle of the movement.

The shadow of my hand is still there, on the strip between the touchpad and the keyboard of my computer. Hesitantly it moves back and forward, passes over the formation of keys, then suddenly pauses, and now with a little swerve, a return movement, shoots towards me.

What is it, shouts the director, his voice even louder, even more forced, once more, once more! I want to nod, want to raise my arm, in appeasement – why can't I move – coming! I want to call, but my voice is a croak. I just manage to raise my head. I look at the stage, see the face of the dancer, who has silently turned towards me, her head to the side, questioningly. Do I have to do everything here myself, hisses the director in German. A protruding vein throbs at his temple. I lean forward, finally press replay.

Outside on the theatre forecourt I'm dazzled by the sun. I need to go outside for a minute, I need some fresh air, I whispered to the assistant, and, with a glance at the back of the director, who has slumped down in his chair: Tell him.

The square in front of me is empty, a white, glistening expanse, with low clipped little trees at the edge. The heaviness of the midday heat weighs everything down, in the sunshine even the skyscrapers look lower than at

night. In front, on the street leading to the underground, an old woman is slowly walking past. She is holding an open newspaper over her head and is bent almost down to the ground.

I don't look down, don't turn round. I don't want to stare at my shadow, not here, where everyone can see me from the gallery of the theatre. Instead I turn towards the street canyons, which lead inland to Kowloon Park.

I enter the park from the south side. Here, too, beneath the leathery leaves of the banyan trees, the air does not cool down, many of those walking on the asphalt paths carry parasols of bright materials. A sweating bride hurries past me, her wedding dress gathered up. I sit down on a stone bench under the roof of the pavilion. Beside me squat a couple of old men playing mah-jong. The quiet clicking of their tiles mixes with the chirping of the birds in the aviaries opposite. I rest my head in my hands, close my eyes.

It cannot be. I must have been mistaken, cannot have seen, what I saw there. I'm exhausted, overtired, everything went too fast in the last few weeks. The call from the director, the preparations, the rushed departure. The first rehearsals already on the evening of my arrival. Too little sleep last night. My silent, silent phone.

I take the mobile phone out of my trouser pocket, switch it on. Two calls, a journalist, who wants to interview me for a Swiss dance magazine, the angry voice of the director – nothing from her. In Germany it's still early, too early, but I don't care, she's the only one whom I can talk to now, to whom I could say: listen, you, there's something not right here. I dial her number, put the phone to my ear, pick up, please pick up at last.

Before she would never switch off her phone, not even at night, she often texted me just before going to sleep, usually long after midnight, a kiss

out of the night, she wrote, or: I'm thinking of you. Now everything is silent, so silent.

I stand up. The sun is almost at its zenith above the skyscraper towers. Without looking round, I start walking, step out onto the sunny path that will lead me back to the theatre.

There's no one to be seen in the sunken outdoor swimming pools, the surface of the water is glassy and untouched. Everything is quiet, almost numb, also in me. I must have been mistaken earlier, exactly, that's it: I should get more sleep. But suddenly, I don't know why – a presentiment, a feeling – I stand still in the middle of the heat, count off two seconds, twenty one, twenty two, and abruptly turn around.

On the tar surface behind me my shadow detaches itself from the contours of the pavilion. It's small, shrunken by the midday sun, by the vertical fall of its rays. A compact, dark blotch skimming over the ground. It runs towards me.

I stand still. Stare at the asphalt, the shadow, which slips under my body. Suddenly I feel cold. Behind me a child calls for its mother. I give myself a shake, look round. The men in the pavilion don't look up from their game, a Cantonese reads a magazine. At the entrance to the swimming pools, a group of exhausted tourists crowd round a coke vending machine. No one seems to have noticed anything, the child too holds on to its mother's hand and doesn't turn round to look at me.

Cautiously I move my foot back and forward. My shadow slides over the asphalt with the movement, grows larger, grows smaller in the angle of light of the sun, leaning on one leg, leaning on the other, everything appears normal now, there's no delay, at least – even after hastily swinging my arms a couple of times – I can't make out any.

I raise my eyes above the tops of the trees at the edge of the park, check the reflections of the sunlight in the skyscrapers. There must be a reasonable explanation: illusions of motion, an optical illusion, dancing reflexes of reflecting glass facades, of opening and closing windows and doors. Were my projector installed in the sky above me, it would be suspended at the zenith. It would replace the sun, would exclude the surroundings and then I would know what I was dealing with.

But it's not like that. Even now I no longer know, what I've just seen, can no longer trust my own eyes. I should, I think, as I hesitantly start walking again, ask the assistant about an eye specialist, a specialist in disturbances of vision. No doubt he could tell me, what causes something like that. Misinterpreted visual stimuli, flickering after-images on strained retinas – it probably happens a lot here. In a city of light, I conclude, illusions are certainly no rarity.

At first I walk slowly, paying attention, head lowered, to each step I take. My shadow remains below me, is in harmony with my rhythm. It's not dragging after me, is not verging on separation, it isn't, I can see that, suspended between the second and third second. Instead, it suddenly seems to me to be a little bit faster than I am.

Then I tear myself away, raise my eyes to the street, to the many jostling passers-by on my way. I must get back to the theatre, can't let the others down, must get back to work, to my computer. I'm now walking rapidly, but I simply can't get warm.

He would like to check the moment of separation once more, says the director. He's standing opposite me, but not looking at me. His gaze doesn't meet my eyes, presumably he's still angry because of what happened earlier. I could already feel it when I entered the rehearsal room. Something was pulling at me, I wanted to stay outside, wanted to

go back into the light. The mood in here, the darkness in the room, makes me feel quite weak. On the stage glows the video field of the quietly whirring projector. Otherwise everything is dark. I shall have to move my work station closer to the stage, closer to the illuminated playing area. We're going back, says the director and grabs the air beside me, back to the beginning. I don't understand his gesture. His grasping the air. Perhaps he wanted to box me on the shoulder and missed. He could have been drinking while I was away. It's only a few days to the premiere, probably he's nervous.

I kneel down in front of the computer. The screen is in stand-by mode, I activate it, test the fields of my software as they appear, push my face close to the bright monitor. On the stage the dancer stretches her back. She kneels on the floor, bends far backwards, till her crown is touching the dance carpet. Briefly I consider, whether I can manage to go online before we start. There is, I know, a weak Wi-Fi signal in this room, an intermittent network. I could Google for optical illusions, for English-speaking eye specialists in Kowloon. And something else has occurred to me. I'll reach her. Not directly, she's not answering, she doesn't want to tell me what's wrong, I realise that now. But there must be a connection, an indirect one by way of the website of her gallerist. She's in contact with him every day, she trusts him, it's been like that since I've known her. I could track down the gallerist, call him, tell him how worried I am. Perhaps he'll drive over to her. Perhaps he'll just laugh at me.

I'm just about to call up the network connections, to log on, quickly, but there the assistant is switching on the music. Already the sombre flow of notes of the violin is filling the room, already the dancer is balancing in the arabesque, her long limbs tensed for the leap. I close the application, want to concentrate. But something distracts me. There's something beside me. A presence, I don't understand it. There's someone beside me,

but I don't see anyone. Now! whispers the director from his chair, but I ignore him, am no longer thinking, am deep inside my grid of figures, obeying my own rhythm. Timing! calls the director and gets ever louder, now! Now!

I don't know what it is. A viscosity perhaps, surrounding me. Yes, perhaps that would describe it: everything is glutinous. I see my fingers rising over the keyboard. But they don't pound, they don't tap at the letters, the numbers. Instead they sink down, they float towards my combinations, so slowly, so calmly, with a delay of two seconds, three seconds.

And then, just before the assistant at the light console, activates the black, the absolute darkness between the scenes, I understand. Something has been displaced. It's not the shadow, that's trailing behind. I myself am. Everything around me is bright. I'm lying in light. Beside me a LED surface stretches into the night sky, its colours merge monochrome with one another, are just changing from orange to red. My head is lying on the pavement curb. People are streaming past me, stepping over me. They run, they mince, they crowd into the skyscraper towers that line the streets, push towards the glass-covered pedestrian walkways, into the lifts racing upwards, all of them want to go higher, ever higher, up to the twentieth, the sixtieth, the seventieth floor.

I don't know how I got here. Probably I fainted in the rehearsal room and they carried me outside. But why did they put me down here, in front of a light sculpture in the middle of the pavement, somewhere in Kowloon, none of it makes any sense.

There's something wrong with the perspectives. I count off two seconds – why am I doing that – and try to sit up. The buildings shoot up into the sky so far above me, I feel quite dizzy, it all seems even higher than usual, a whole city pushing up towards the sky.

Why can I not remember. Something must have happened at the rehearsal, my fingers, there was something about my fingers, but I just can't think what it was. Someone was there, someone was beside me, and still is now, I can feel it. And then the cold, the icy cold in my limbs that doesn't lift, while on the other side of the street, the digital sign of a chemist's shows almost forty degrees – none of it is explicable.

On the ground, stuck in the lower metal edge of the LED surface is a tattered edition of the South China Morning Post. I discover a word, tug at the newspaper until I'm holding it in my hands. A group of Green activists is taking the stores of a brand name to court for light pollution. Over fifty complaints about light nuisance have been received in recent weeks alone, announces the Environmental Protection Department. The flashing and flickering of the ever brighter advertising surfaces is hard to bear for many.

It's this city, I think and let the newspaper which has suddenly become so heavy slip from my hands, this damned, glittering Hong Kong, I should never, ever have come here. If I had gone anywhere, then to her.

I board the aircraft behind a plump, panting Chinese. I am so tired, lean on him, but he doesn't seem to notice. Once he wipes the spot where I'm touching him. I should be surprised that his hand passes through me – should – but I remain quite calm.

I'm losing things. Where did I buy the ticket, when did I get my passport from the hotel room. Did I inform the director before my departure, the assistant. Where is my computer, my equipment. Did I go back to the rehearsal room, dismantle everything. I don't know. My consciousness has – blackouts, if you like. And it all really has to do with light. I can no longer bear darkness, begin to lose myself in it.

In my window seat I lean against the pane of glass. I want to see the city, now, when we take off, its shining outline. Perhaps I should stay here,

I'm already beginning to get used to the glowing and shining. But I have no influence on that. Someone has decided that I should sit in this airplane. That it's better if I go. I didn't take the decision.

In my trouser pocket I look for my mobile phone. I would like to text her. Like to let her know that I'm coming, that soon everything will be different. But when I take the phone out of my pocket, it's grey. The keypad has disappeared, the display is dead. All covered in a wan veil. I turn the device around, hold it to my ear, tap it, shake it. The sight of it reminds me of something, but I don't know –

“He's bound to be with someone else by now,” says a voice behind me in German. I turn round, see two young women. One is leaning her head against the rest and staring at the ceiling. Her gaze so empty.

We're not flying. We should have lifted off a long time ago, at least I think so. Why aren't we flying I ask the steward who is darting past. But he doesn't hear me, pays no attention to me, doesn't even look up.

“Sir, why are we not taking off?” calls the friend of the woman after him. The steward stops, turns round, comes back smiling. He must apologise for the delay, he says in perfect English. One of the passengers must have gone missing, if we could just be patient for a moment longer. And then he points with a small movement of the wrist, at my seat.

I want to protest, want to say something, but I can't hear my own voice. I start to twist in my seat, want to draw attention to myself, explain myself to them with gestures, but then the steward is already turning away, then the woman friend is already leaning back again, whispering reassuringly to her motionless neighbour. And suddenly I have a presentiment, suddenly I lean forward.

At the end of the passageway the steward is hurrying towards a figure, which has just come round the corner. I hear the calls, see the zealotry, with which he is guided to my seat, the rush in which

everything takes place now, Sir, where have you been, we've only been waiting for you.

I can't say whether he noticed me. I like to think, that I saw something in his eyes, in my eyes, a brief flickering as he looks down at me, as he pulls out the folded airplane blanket from under me and sits down on me. My cry remains mute. Not even I can hear myself now. And as we slowly move off, as the aircraft approaches the runway, I feel I know what is about to happen. I have a foreboding of what is going to happen, when we leave this city, this city and its lights. When they switch off the cabin lights. I will -